

# Stretching Toward Sunday

Thoughts, readings and reflections  
based on this week's lectionary readings

October 5, 2014

Proper 22A/Ordinary 27A/Pentecost +17

The readings this week:

- Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20 ◦ Psalm 19
- Philippians 3:4b-14 ◦ Matthew 21:33-46



[Click here to read this week's Scriptures](#)

## Life, Death and Assorted Fruits and Nuts

What an awful story! How are we to understand this tale of murder, conflict, and mayhem? Who is truly in charge? Who holds authority? Making sense of the parable of the householder, vineyard, and tenants is a tough assignment. Whether one is preaching, teaching, or reading, this parable presents a host of problems.

The wise preacher and teacher will want to set the parable within its overall context of Matthew's gospel as part of the fifth narrative block (chapters 21-27) that begins with Jesus' entry into Jerusalem (reserved for Palm/Passion Sunday in the Revised Common Lectionary) and ends with his crucifixion.

Like other parables, where one stands depends on where one sits in the story. The most common reading of this parable is allegorical. The householder is equated with God, the vineyard with God's reign and Israel, his servants with the prophets, and the son with Jesus. So who are the tenants? In this reading, they are the religious elite, the leaders of the Jews.

The religious leaders fall right into Jesus' hand in answering the question "Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" Why, of course, the owner will give them what they deserve—a nasty death. In responding like this, Warren Carter notes "They predict their own destruction at the hands of the Rome in 70 C.E." (Matthew and the Margins, 428). To make matters even worse, the kingdom/vineyard will be snatched away and given to new tenants.

No one likes to hear condemnation or have their world order shaken, and the religious leaders of Jesus' day are no exception. But then neither are we. This reading of the parable fits well with our view as the Gentiles given access to the Kingdom of God. We can sit comfortably in our pews and be reassured of our role, our place, and our destiny. Or should we? Can we?

We would do well to ask, who might be offended by this parable today? What do we believe about this story

and about the reign of God? Is it a matter of life or death for us, or just another Bible story? Who are the tenants in the vineyard? Who do we see comprising the rest of the cast?

Some readers will see shades of colonialism and empire in this story. They may identify the tenant farmers with immigrants and/or migrant workers. Would it be too far a stretch to imagine something along the lines of what Joseph Conrad wrote about in *Heart of Darkness*? One might make connections between the miners in Appalachia and the mining companies that exploited them and ruined the land. Still others may see the tenants as migrant workers simply wanting a fair share. It is relatively simple to cast these roles with others, but where do we fit into the story?

What if the vineyard were equated with the church, and we are the tenants? What if we resist change and try to keep others out of the church/vineyard, even rejecting Jesus? Are the walls built to keep people in or out?

The church does not belong to us; we are the church. We pass through this world, migrant workers in the reign of God on earth. Christ is the cornerstone, and while he possesses the ability to crush and destroy those who would thwart his purpose, he also seeks to open the vineyard for all to enter.

However one approaches this parable, one should do so with caution, humility, and a willingness to think outside the box (or in this case, the wall). Our call is to be fruitful while we are here, not struggle for ownership or control. We don't run the show; we aren't in charge. All authority belongs to God, indeed every atom and molecule of creation. That, dear friends, is a very good thing indeed.

Sharron R.  
Blezard,  
[Stewardship of  
Life](#)



# Reflecting on the Word



## \_\_\_ 1st Reading: [Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20](#)

What part, if any, have the Ten Commandments had in forming your faith? What right did God have to issue these commands? What reasons does God give for prohibiting idolatry? How would you interpret the promise given to those who honor their parents? Murder and adultery are not just external acts; they are matters of the heart (see Mt 5:21-30). What, then, does it mean to obey these commands? In what way is coveting a wrong not only against our neighbor but against God? What "other gods" or idols compete for your allegiance? [Quiet Time Bible Study, InterVarsity Press](#)

## \_\_\_ Psalm Reading: [Psalm 19](#)

What does creation reveal about God? The terms law, statutes, precepts, commands and ordinances in this passage are synonyms for Scripture. In verses 7-11, how are the Scriptures described? What do they do? What is the overall effect of the psalmist's encounter with God through nature and the Scriptures? From which of the effects of Scripture listed in verses 7-11 have you benefitted? How has this psalm been helpful to you by offering insight or comfort? [Quiet Time Bible Study, InterVarsity Press](#)

## \_\_\_ 3rd Reading: [Philippians 3:4b-14](#)

Contrast Paul the Pharisee (vv. 4-6) with Paul the Christian (vv. 7-11). How have his reasons for confidence changed? In verses 12-14 Paul compares himself to an athlete who is running a race. Why is this such an appropriate description of the Christian life? Have you ever placed your confidence in something, thinking it would bring you closer to God that you now consider to be rubbish? Explain. In verse 6 Paul speaks of "legalistic righteousness." What legalisms are today's Christians pressured to keep? How do these legalisms get in the way of knowing Christ and rejoicing in the Lord? [Quiet Time Bible Study, InterVarsity Press](#)

All the absurd little meetings, decisions, inner skirmishes that go to make up our days. It all adds up to very little, and yet it all adds up to very much. Our days are full of nonsense, and yet not, because it is precisely into the nonsense of our days that God speaks to us words of great significance - not words that are written in the stars but words that are written into the raw stuff and nonsense of our days, which are not nonsense just because God speaks into the midst of them. And the words that he says, to each of us differently, are *"Be brave ... be merciful ... feed my lambs ... press on toward the goal."*

~ [Frederick Buechner](#)

## Praying Toward Sunday

God, I confess that have seized the vineyard of my soul, as if it were mine, as if I were the one who had dug and planted, and built a fence and a watchtower. But my soul is not "mine," it is yours. You create me, and give me the growth. You are the one who creates the fertile soil of my being, who plants within me the seed of your Spirit. You grow within me. The fruit of my soul is yours, not mine.

But because you seem distant, and your absence is painful, and because I want to control my life, I have usurped what is truly yours. I have laid claim to your vineyard, and done violence to your trust in me. This is my unending struggle, to let go of my own soul, to let it truly be yours, to overcome my illusion that it ought to be mine, and that I can wrest it from you and have it for myself.

Forgive me, and instill in me a desire to bear fruit for you rather than to control my life. Heal my fear of your absence, my desire for control. Give me faith to meet my fear and grasping with courage and trust. May I be a faithful worker in the vineyard of my own soul, nurturing and gathering what you give, offering to you and not hoarding for myself the fruits of my heart. God grant me a good harvest, and peace. Amen.

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[Unfolding Light](#)



## \_\_\_ 4th Reading: [Matthew 21:33-46](#)

From time to time we all have been involved in confrontations. How do you feel in these situations? What does the parable of the two sons reveal about the chief priests and the elders? How does the parable of the tenants illustrate the character of the Father, the Son and the religious leaders? What do these parables teach for today's world? [Quiet Time Bible Study, InterVarsity Press](#)